

# The Shape and Meaning of Biblical History

*Daniel Gordis*

According to a popular opinion among contemporary scholars of religion, there is no such thing as a “biblical worldview.” Many—in keeping with the deconstructionist school of thought—insist that the biblical text is not a coherent, homogenized narrative, but rather a collection of documents spanning hundreds of years, multiple authors, disparate styles, and diverse ideologies. Any attempt to articulate a unified philosophy underlying the Bible is thus condemned as hopelessly simplistic and ultimately futile; all we have, they argue, is a polyphony of voices, a medley of claims and counter-claims, official doctrines and subversive positions. David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, for instance, the authors of *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, contend that

Because of its multivocal nature, the Bible, despite its biases of gender, race/ethnicity, and class, makes provision for its own critique. It points to its own incongruity.... The Bible shows us not merely patriarchy, elitism, and nationalism; it shows us the fragility of these ideologies through irony and counter-voices. Voices from the margins, voices from the fissures and

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cracks in the text, assure us that male sovereignty is contrived and precarious, that racial/ethnic chauvinism is ultimately insupportable, that social elitism is self-deluding, that religious rectitude is self-serving.<sup>1</sup>

In the absence of a single authoritative voice, any attempt to declare a particular passage or episode emblematic of the biblical worldview is, according to this line of thought, doomed to failure.

In an essay I published in this journal just over a year ago (“The Tower of Babel and the Birth of Nationhood,” *AZURE* 40), I attempted to prove this claim wrong. The misleadingly simple story of the Tower of Babel described in Genesis 11, I suggested, in truth serves as an introduction to the Hebrew Bible’s political philosophy: namely, the notion that the ethnic-cultural commonwealth is an indispensable condition for human freedom and self-realization. I sought to demonstrate that, through a variety of subtle yet masterful literary and stylistic techniques,<sup>2</sup> the biblical story promotes not only the concept of ethnic and cultural heterogeneity (expressed here as the “dispersion” of different peoples), but also the formation of political entities that can promote the flourishing of those ethnicities and cultures—what is known today as the nation-state.<sup>3</sup> Hence, I concluded, the concept of nationality, or of a distinct, particular group identity based on a common language, culture, land, and blood-ties, was not a modern European innovation, as some scholars proclaim it to be. Rather, and despite the claims made by Gunn, Fewell, and many others, it was an integral part of the Hebrew Bible from its very beginnings.

This was, I concede, a rather controversial thesis, and not merely because of my assumption that the Bible *has* a political philosophy, but also because it was predicated on a single (albeit foundational) narrative. Undoubtedly, we must be wary of readings that reduce the Bible’s complex and nuanced thought to a monolithic dogma. Yet all too frequently, in their eagerness to take the Bible apart, its critics miss the forest for the trees. For though the biblical text may reflect a variety of viewpoints from a multiplicity of authors, it has still undergone a rigorous editing process. The result is a coherent whole imbued with a distinct ideological intent. Indeed, a pano-

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ramic examination of the biblical corpus reveals a magnificently elaborate structure, one that a fashionably microscopic reading could easily miss. In the present essay, I will demonstrate that somewhere in the course of redaction, the biblical text was endowed with a structure meant to transform the call for national heterogeneity from the isolated lesson of a particular story to the overarching message of the Bible at large.

## II

The key to decoding the Bible's meta-doctrine of proto-nationalism lies, I believe, in the literary device known as chiasmus. Chiasmus, or a chiasitic structure, refers to a set of literary elements (e.g., words, images, concepts) arranged in an inverted order, usually denoted as ABBA.<sup>4</sup> A chiasmus can appear in a single verse, such as the oft-quoted warning against murder in Genesis, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man will his blood be shed."<sup>5</sup> This sentence can be broken down as follows:

A<sup>1</sup> Whoever *sheds*  
B<sup>1</sup> the *blood*  
C<sup>1</sup> of *man*  
C<sup>2</sup> by *man*  
B<sup>2</sup> will his *blood*  
A<sup>2</sup> be *shed*.

Named after the inverted shape of the Greek letter Chi (Χ), a chiasmus may serve as a mnemonic device or an aesthetic embellishment. Perhaps its most important literary function, however, is to highlight a pivotal element, often the C of an ABCBA structure. "An emphatic focus on the center," says biblical scholar John Welch, "can be employed by a skillful composer to elevate the importance of a central concept."<sup>6</sup>

Though chiasmi are frequently employed in the construction of short literary units, they are no less effective in the arrangement of larger ones.<sup>7</sup>

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This is particularly true in the Bible, where chiasmi dominate not only specific verses, chapters, and books, but also the *entire length of the biblical text*, stretching from the beginning of the book of Exodus through the end of II Chronicles. This structure extends over such a large expanse of text that it can be easily missed. Yet when viewed from a sufficiently wide perspective, the biblical narrative reveals a structure that is critical to the expression of one of its fundamental political claims. With extraordinary artistic skill, the biblical redactors composed a text whose discrete elements come together to form an intricate chiasmic structure, describing the rise and fall of the Jewish commonwealth:

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- A<sup>1</sup> **Exodus:** A foreign ruler (Egypt's Pharaoh), sees the Jews as a people, and fears they may aspire to territorial autonomy ("Look, the Israelite people... may join our enemies and fight us, and go up from this land"<sup>8</sup>).
  - B<sup>1</sup> **Exodus–Deuteronomy:** The Jews are outside the land, yet are—on the whole—united.
  - C<sup>1</sup> **Judges:** The Jews reside in their land, but their territorial sovereignty is tenuous; internal division is a major problem.
  - D<sup>1</sup> **I Samuel:** The Jews, in their land, are united under a monarch (Saul); some political stability is achieved, but the king is deeply flawed, and cannot pass the kingdom on to his son.
  - E **II Samuel:** The Jews, united in their land, live under a great and powerful monarch (David), who consolidates the nation, achieves political stability, and succeeds in passing the kingdom on to his son.
  - D<sup>2</sup> **I Kings:** The Jews, in their land, are united under a monarch (Solomon); some political stability is achieved, but the king is deeply flawed and cannot pass the kingdom on to his son.
  - C<sup>2</sup> **I Kings–II Kings:** The Jews reside in their land, but their territorial sovereignty is tenuous; internal division is a major problem.
  - B<sup>2</sup> **Prophets–Writings:** The majority of Jews are outside the land, yet are—on the whole—united.
  - A<sup>2</sup> **II Chronicles:** A foreign ruler (King Cyrus of Persia) sees the Jews as a people, and exhorts them to assume territorial autonomy ("Any one of you of all his people, the Lord his God be with him and let him go up"<sup>9</sup>).

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Though aesthetically striking, the main objective of this chiasmic structure is unmistakably ideological. Despite the Bible's length, multivocality, and stylistic diversity, the final composition taken as a whole tells the story of one collective protagonist—the People of Israel<sup>10</sup>—and its quest for sovereignty. It also, crucially, emphasizes the pivotal element “E” as the Israelites' finest hour, when they flourish under their greatest king, united in their own land. Recognizing this biblical chiasmus allows us to discern this bigger picture, one that a narrow focus can easily obscure. Since, however, the chiasmus is made up of distinct elements, each serving a specific and vital function within the structure as a whole, it is to them that we must now turn to appreciate the Bible's overarching message.

### III

At both ends of the chiasmus is a proclamation. Voiced, surprisingly, neither by Israelites nor by God, these bracketing phrases nonetheless articulate the Bible's ideal of the sovereign nation-state. The initial proclamation is uttered by Pharaoh—who, significantly, is the first to refer to the Israelites as a “people” (A<sup>1</sup>). Alarmed by the dramatic increase in the Hebrews' population, Pharaoh declares that “the children of Israel (*am bnei Yisrael*) are much too numerous for us.”<sup>11</sup> In my previous essay, I argued that the Egyptian ruler was afraid, not, as one might have expected, of a potential revolt by the Israelite nation, but rather of the possibility—if not eventuality—that it might “go up from this land.”<sup>12</sup> Put simply, Pharaoh is worried that the People of Israel will leave in search of their own land. For that, the Bible seems to suggest, is what peoples invariably—and rightly—seek to do.

The significance of Pharaoh's premonition in the biblical narrative becomes even clearer when we compare it to the Bible's closing verses (A<sup>2</sup>). Once again, it is a non-Jewish monarch who speaks. Once again, the Israel-

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ites have been exiled from their land, this time to Babylon. And once again, it is a foreign ruler who intuits that the People of Israel, being a nation, require the autonomy and self-determination that only the possession of their own territory can make possible. However, whereas Pharaoh fears that the Hebrews will inevitably seek their own land, the Persian King Cyrus encourages them to do just that:

And in the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, when the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah was fulfilled, the Lord roused the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia to issue a proclamation throughout his realm by word of mouth and in writing, as follows: Thus said King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord God of Heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and has charged me with building him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Any one of you of all his *people*, the Lord his God be with him and let him go up.<sup>13</sup>

And so, both the Bible's opening and closing statements regard the Israelites as a people; both make clear that, as a people, the Israelites' natural condition is to dwell in their own land. Finally, and tellingly, both refer to the return to that land as an "ascent" (*ala*, literally "go up").

But beyond the implications of these particular utterances, the historical periods that frame the Bible's narrative are of momentous importance to the chronicles of the Jewish people. The exile in Egypt and the exile in Babylon were the crucibles in which Jewish nationhood was forged and then redefined. When the Israelites, as the worried Pharaoh notices, become a people, it was the result of years of slavery and hardship. The seventy people who had migrated to Egypt in the time of Jacob and his sons were a clan; the group that left Egypt centuries later is a veritable nation. Similarly, the people exiled to Babylon were, prior to the exile, highly tribalized; by the time of their return to the Land of Israel, tribal affiliations have fallen away, and a far stronger national identity has emerged (for example, the mere fact that Ezra expelled the Jews' foreign wives bespeaks a far more rigid sense of "insider" and "outsider" than the Bible has previously known<sup>14</sup>). The Jew-

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ish nation, then, was principally formed not during repose in its Promised Land, but through the trials and tribulations of exile.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, it is noteworthy that whenever the Israelites live *outside* their land, they appear to do so without any major internal division. In Exodus through Deuteronomy (B<sup>1</sup>), for example, they cross the desert on their way to the Land of Canaan. Despite the arduous journey—and despite the relative newness of the Jewish nation—internal conflict is a comparatively minor theme of the Israelites’ story. To be sure, conflict does erupt, in the form of the rebellion of Korach, for example, or in the divisiveness surrounding the report of the ten spies. But by and large, the Israelites are described as moving slowly but steadily towards the land they were promised, and in which they are destined to thrive. The clashes and disputes along the way are largely incidental to this quest.

After the destruction of the Temple and prior to Cyrus’ proclamation (B<sup>2</sup>), we once again find the Israelites living outside their land. We know that this life in exile was not without its divisions; there was, for instance, the clash between the prophet Jeremiah and Hananiah ben Azur over the question of rebellion against the King of Babylon.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, with some Jews remaining in their homeland and the rest exiled to Babylon, tensions between these two communities must naturally have arisen.<sup>17</sup> These instances of communal discord, however, are hardly the focus of the biblical narrative. On the contrary, Jeremiah’s most famous exhortation to the exiled Jewish nation conveys a powerful message of unity: Addressing “the *whole community* which [God] exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon,” Jeremiah encourages them to “build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters... and seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the Lord on its behalf.”<sup>18</sup> Though far from an ideal state, this period of exile is not marked—at least as far as the biblical account is concerned—by any grave conflict.

Once inside their designated land, however, the Israelites fall prey to internal divisions, endangering their territorial sovereignty. The period of the

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Judges (C<sup>1</sup>) is rife with conflict, both external and internal: Time and again, we are told that “the land was quiet for forty years”<sup>19</sup>—seemingly indicating that, for the rest of the time, the land was anything but. Indeed, the book of Judges is rife with descriptions of Israel’s wars with its neighbors. Internally, too, discord and factionalism reigned supreme. “In those days there was no king in Israel, each person did as he pleased,” is the book of Judges’ refrain, signifying a lack of leadership and national unity.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the most striking example of this internal strife is the incident of the concubine at Gibeah, a horrific tale in which a woman is raped to death by a crowd of Benjaminites. The horrendous episode results in a civil war, exacting a death toll of 25,100 men from the tribe of Benjamin alone, and some 18,000 from the rest of Israel.<sup>21</sup> This story, too, concludes with the refrain, “In those days, there was no king in Israel; each person did as he pleased,”<sup>22</sup> a state of affairs that Deuteronomy has already defined as dangerous and highly undesirable.<sup>23</sup>

And indeed, the same is true of the post-Solomonic era (C<sup>2</sup>): Following the division of Solomon’s empire into two kingdoms, northern Israel and southern Judea, internal division becomes a serious problem, and a major contributing factor to the kingdoms’ ultimate downfall and the subsequent banishment of the people from the land. Much of the Books of Kings (I Kings 12 through the end of II Kings) describes the often bloody conflict between the Jewish people, which, given the menacing empires to their north (Assyria and, later, Babylon) and their south (Egypt), they could ill afford. Of course, trapped as they were between warring behemoths, the Israelite kingdoms may well have fallen even without internal discord to weaken them. What is important for our purposes, however, is the understanding that, in the face of such formidable enemies, the lack of unity had a devastating effect on the people’s resilience and fortitude.

The situation improves during the reigns of Kings Saul (D<sup>1</sup>) and Solomon (D<sup>2</sup>). The Israelites, still in their land, are united in a single sovereign state under the leadership of a functioning king. There is no major internal dissonance to speak of, and a sense of political stability reigns. To be

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sure, neither Saul nor Solomon is perfect: Saul is plagued by his jealousy of David, and toward the end of his life hovers on the brink of insanity. More importantly, he failed in his earlier days as king to fulfill God's command to wipe out the Amalekite nation.<sup>24</sup> Despite Saul's repentance and prostrations, the prophet Samuel chastises him and foretells the end of his rule: "I will not go back with you," he says, "for you have rejected the Lord's command, and the Lord has rejected you as king over Israel."<sup>25</sup> It is for this reason that Saul's son will not inherit his kingdom. Political stability is not yet complete. (After Saul's death, it should be noted, the tribes of Israel split and battle each other<sup>26</sup>—a hint of what is to follow after the reign of Solomon.) But Israel has still come a long way since the time the judges; progress has definitely been made.

Israel is even more secure under the reign of Solomon, often referred to as the "golden age" in Jewish history. His kingdom extended "from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistine and to the border of Egypt"<sup>27</sup>; his wisdom was said to be greater than that of all the Egyptians<sup>28</sup>; and finally, unlike his father David, he was permitted to build the Temple in Jerusalem. Yet Solomon, too, is flawed. In violation of the explicit Deuteronomic prohibition against a king keeping too many horses or having too many wives, lest "his heart will be led astray,"<sup>29</sup> Solomon does both: He acquires some 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horses<sup>30</sup> and "love[s] many foreign women"<sup>31</sup>—to wit, seven hundred royal wives and three hundred concubines. As a result, and precisely as Deuteronomy cautions, Solomon falls from grace. His "wives turned away [his] heart after other gods, and he was not as wholeheartedly devoted to the Lord his God as his father David had been."<sup>32</sup>

And so, as with Saul, God is disappointed in his choice of king, and decrees that the kingdom be taken from his hand. "Because... you have not kept my covenant and the laws which I enjoined upon you, I will tear the kingdom away from you... However, I will not tear away the whole kingdom; I will give your son one tribe, for the sake of my servant David and for the sake of Jerusalem which I have chosen."<sup>33</sup> Thus is Solomon, too, denied the ability to bequeath the whole kingdom to his son.

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## IV

**B**etween Saul and Solomon, however, hovers the figure of King David. Unlike both his predecessor and successor, he achieves such political stability that he is able to bequeath his kingdom in its entirety to his son. Not surprisingly, it is this king who stands at the zenith of our chiasmus (E).

David holds a place of honor in the pantheon of biblical history. He forms a viable state from what had hitherto been a collection of agrarian villages and bazaar towns,<sup>34</sup> establishes Jerusalem as his capital, and successfully expands the borders of his kingdom. “The Lord,” we are told, “gave David victory wherever he went. David reigned over all Israel, and David executed true justice among all his people.”<sup>35</sup> From a purely literary standpoint, David’s reign is portrayed as the very apex of the Israelite monarchy. In the words of biblical scholars Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman,

David’s grand destiny unfolds, even as Saul continues to reign. On the field of battle against the massed Philistine armies, David topples the mighty Goliath and earns the acclaim of the nation, enraging King Saul. In a desperate flight into the wilderness to escape from Saul’s murderous jealousy, David further proves his leadership, bravery, and skill. As the chief of a roaming band of mighty men, he settles scores, fends off enemy attacks, exacts God’s vengeance, and distributes captured booty to the oppressed and poor. When Saul dies on the battlefield, David is proclaimed king of Judah and eventually of all Israel as God’s true anointed one, or “messiah.” It is a classic tale of the rise of the young hero, a warrior for the true faith and a man of extraordinary charisma, who assumes the mantle of a failed leader and becomes the embodiment of his people’s hopes and dreams.<sup>36</sup>

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King David is a successful military commander, a powerful statesman, and a religious leader. This tripartite role is demonstrated most powerfully in the description of his ceremonial transport of the ark to Jerusalem, symbolically combining David's political and military prowess with his religious commitment to establishing God's presence on earth.<sup>37</sup> He is also a man of letters, credited with the authorship of much of the book of Psalms.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the Bible repeatedly regards the Messiah as a "shoot... from the stump of Jesse," i.e., from David's father.<sup>39</sup>

David's rule is the pinnacle of the Bible's chiasmic structure and, by extension, of the nation's history. During David's reign, the Israelites dwell securely in their own land: united, autonomous, their sovereignty unquestioned. David provides his people with military protection from its enemies. He is a political genius, and is able to maintain internal cohesion. He is also a man of God, and a musical and literary genius. In his day, Israel flourishes both physically and spiritually—precisely the situation a commonwealth is *intended* to make possible. With David, the Bible's original ideal for humanity as expressed immediately after the Flood—they will branch out "according to their clans and languages, by their lands and nations," is fully realized.

True, David is far from perfect. Though he is the object of much praise in the book of Samuel (and later in Chronicles), the Bible makes no effort to conceal his flaws—most particularly, though not exclusively, his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba and his plot to have her husband, Uriah, killed in battle.<sup>40</sup> Despite his many virtues, David is still an adulterer, a ruthless warrior, an uncompassionate husband (to his wife Michal), and a dysfunctional father (to Amnon and Absalom). The Bible is keenly aware of the vices of men, even the most praiseworthy among them.

This open and honest treatment of David's flaws is exemplary of the Bible's portrayal of both exile and sovereignty, and the advantages and disadvantages inherent in both states. For the Bible's historical narrative is political, and not eschatological, in nature. Just as its lows are not without their redeeming qualities, so are its highs not portrayed as altogether idyl-

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lic. The establishment of a sovereign Israelite commonwealth, the biblical text warns, will not be a panacea for all the ills that plague humanity. It is, however, the ideal toward which we are meant to reach—even if, invariably, we are destined to fall short.

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There is one more question our analysis must address: If our reading is correct, and the Hebrew Bible is purposely structured so as to endorse the cultural-ethnic commonwealth as the ideal condition under which humanity may prosper, why is this political statement not more commonly recognized? How is it that the overarching chiasmic scheme of the Bible has gone largely unnoticed by centuries of readers and critics?

One central reason for this oversight is that the vast majority of the Western world reads the Bible through a Christian lens. The New Testament, with its distinctly universalistic nature on the one hand and its different order of biblical books on the other, leaves little to no room for the sort of reading proposed here. Indeed, as opposed to the particularist inclination of the Hebrew Bible, the Christian one is a *universalistic* text. The former's concern with the history of one specific nation, tasked with fulfilling a specific mission in a specific land, is all but absent from the New Testament's more inclusive doctrine.<sup>41</sup> In fact, the two Bibles are interested in very different sorts of kingdoms. When "kingdom" appears in the Hebrew Bible, it refers to political entities, ruled by flesh-and-blood rulers and governed by human laws; in the New Testament, the term denotes the heavenly realm of God, and is entirely separate from the province of human beings. "Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's," urges the Gospel,<sup>42</sup> establishing a clear division between the "Kingdom of God" and the dominion of man.<sup>43</sup> Thus, the Hebrew Bible's

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political view stands in glaring contrast to Christianity's apocalyptic ideal. Ethnic-cultural commonwealths, into which human beings disperse "according to their clans and languages, by their lands and nations," are clearly at odds with the Pauline world order.

There is, however, a second important factor that precluded the interpretation I have presented here: the order of the biblical books in the Christian canon. According to the Jewish sequence, the Bible closes with Chronicles I and II. Yet in the Christian version, Chronicles comes after Kings, and is followed by Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. The historical portion of the Bible thus ends with the Jews in exile, with no hope of return on the horizon. This order may make more chronological sense, but it completely disrupts the carefully constructed chiasmus of the Hebrew canon, thereby obfuscating the point it is trying to make.

Further blurring the political message of the Hebrew canon is the placement of the prophetic literature *after* the historical section. This is no coincidence. Although the Hebrew tripartite division was well known to the Christian tradition ("He said to them, This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms"<sup>44</sup>) it was ignored, and the books of the Bible were regrouped according to literary genres. The reason for this, scholars argue, is that "the variant sequence was best suited to express the claim of the Church that the New Testament is the fulfillment of the Hebrew scriptures of the Jews. The closing of the canon with Malachi's prophecy of the 'day of the Lord' to be heralded by the return of Elijah provides a transition to the New Testament with John the Baptist as the new Elijah acclaiming his Messiah."<sup>45</sup>

The order of the Christian canon, then, was meant to further the claim that the Church fulfills the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible, whereas the sequence of the Hebrew canon was meant to serve a *political* vision, which perceives diverse national (or proto-national) entities as critical elements of the divine plan for humanity. Paying attention to the narrative's meta-structure, in this case, is more than just important. It's essential.

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## VI

The progression described in the Bible from exile to national sovereignty in the Promised Land soon repeats itself when the Jews return from the Babylonian exile to rebuild Jerusalem and establish the Second Commonwealth. Following another brief “golden era”—this time under the anti-assimilationist Hasmonean regime—the nation begins to fray once more, deteriorating both militarily and morally until its final collapse at the hand of the Roman Empire. Once again, the Jews are expelled from their land.

But the story of the Jewish people does not end there: In their two thousand years of exile, Jews held fast to the vision of the Hebrew Bible, awaiting the day when they might return to their own land, speak their own language, and be ruled by their own government. Memories of the Israelite kingdom, described in the books of Joshua, Judges, and Kings, inspired and guided the Jews while in exile, giving shape to their national aspirations. And eventually, a Third Commonwealth began to take form. Forged in the crucible of European antisemitism, the Zionist movement led the Jewish nation back to its ancestral home. True to the biblical pattern, return to the land was followed by the establishment of sovereignty, military success, and the attainment of political power. The State of Israel achieved international recognition in 1947, independence in 1948, an ingathering of exiles in the 1940s and 1950s, military triumphs in 1967 (and, after an initial setback, in 1973 as well), and, in recent decades, cultural and economic booms. The Jews have successfully recreated the kingdom of the Bible’s dreams. As historians often note, of all the peoples who existed in this part of the world three thousand years ago, it is only the Jews who still live in the same place, speak the same language, and practice the same religion.<sup>46</sup>

The Hebrew Bible’s chiasmus, however, bears an important warning, as well: Zeniths do not always endure. Political stability must be laboriously maintained; decline and destruction are always a danger. This warning is

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all the more urgent today; the biblical endorsement of the ethnic commonwealth has never been more vital, both for humanity in general and for Jews in particular. Living as we are in the age of globalization, an era in which the nation-state is considered by many an evil anachronism—and Israel, specifically, as illegitimate—it is imperative that we pay heed to the political vision of the Hebrew Bible. It is time to reintroduce the biblical message into our discussions of the nation-state. The peoples of the world, and the Jews among them, must be reminded of the significance of national sovereignty—both of the grand achievements to which it can lead, and of how easily such achievements may be lost. We must be reinspired to seek the grand destiny made possible by nation-states, and guard them closely, lest they crumble and fall, taking with them the unique form of human flourishing that is possible only when a people dwells free, in its own land.

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## Notes

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1. David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford, 1993), p. 204.

2. Significantly, the Tower of Babel narrative is strategically placed between the account of the Flood, which culminates with several mentions of the word “people” and the dispersion of human beings “according to their clans and languages, by their lands and nations” (Genesis 10:20 and 10:31), and the election of Abram, which inaugurates the Bible’s focus on a distinct people. The narrative is also linguistically linked to the Exodus story, suggesting that the human yearning for territorial autonomy (a yearning that the generation of the Flood, with their fear of being “scattered all over the earth” (Genesis 11:4), had sought to resist) is what ultimately leads the Israelites to leave Egypt in quest of political sovereignty in their own land. The Bible thus charts the course of an arduous national project, establishing a model not only for Jews, but for humankind at large, and for anyone concerned with human freedom and flourishing.

3. Daniel Gordis, “The Tower of Babel and the Birth of Nationhood,” *AZURE* 40 (Spring 2010), pp. 19-36.

4. See, for example, Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (London: Sheffield, 2001), pp. 201-208.

5. Genesis, 9:6. Another classic chiasmus may be found in the verse in Isaiah “and what he opens, no one will shut; what he shuts, no one will open” (Isaiah 22:22).

6. John W. Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981), p. 10.

7. Welch, in this context, remarks: “Chiasmus may give order to thoughts as well as to sounds, and... it thus may give structure to the thought pattern and development of entire literary units, as well as to shorter sections whose composition is more dependent on immediate tones and rhythms.” Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, p. 11.

8. Exodus 1:9-10.

9. II Chronicles 36:23.

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10. See, in this context, Assaf Inbari, "Towards a Hebrew Literature," *AZURE* 9 (Spring 2000), pp. 99-154.

11. Exodus 1:9. The phrase *am bnei Yisrael* never again appears in the Pentateuch. The phrase *anshei am Yisrael*, however, does appear later in the Bible (Ezra 2:2 and Nehemiah 7:7).

12. Exodus 1:10. This reading of the verse is endorsed by Arnold B. Ehrlich, *Mikra Ki-Pheshuto: The Bible According to Its Literal Meaning* (New York: Ktav, 1969), vol. 1, pp. 134-135.

13. II Chronicles 36:22-23.

14. Ezra 10.

15. Despite its importance as a formative phase in the creation of the Jewish nation, exile is not the ideal the Bible has in mind for the Jewish people, or, for that matter, for any people. The course of Israelite history clearly aims for a different telos.

16. Jeremiah 28:1-4. See also Benjamin Lau, *Jeremiah: The Fate of a Prophet* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot and Hemed, 2010), pp. 170-188 [Hebrew].

17. Such as, for example, the dispute as to which segment of the people God favors (see, for example, Ezekiel 33:24).

18. Jeremiah 29:4-7.

19. Judges 3:11, 5:31 and 8:28. Judges 3:30 refers to eighty years of peace (a multiple of forty).

20. See Judges 17:6 and Judges 21:25.

21. Judges 20:24, 20:46.

22. Judges 21:25.

23. Deuteronomy 12:8.

24. I Samuel 15:2-26.

25. I Samuel 15:26.

26. II Samuel 2.

27. I Kings 5:1.

28. I Kings 5:10.

29. Deuteronomy 17:16-17.

30. I Kings 10:26.

31. I Kings 11:1.

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32. I Kings 11:4.

33. I Kings 11:11-13.

34. Baruch Halpern, *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Erdemans, 2001), p. 32.

35. II Samuel 8:14-15.

36. Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *David and Solomon: In Search of the Bible's Sacred Kings and the Roots of the Western Tradition* (New York: Free Press, 2007), pp. 6-7.

37. II Samuel 6-7.

38. This is a complex claim. Robert Alter summarizes much of the scholarly thinking on the subject. He writes: "David was no doubt identified by the editors of the collection as the exemplary psalmist because in his story, as told in 1 and 2 Samuel, he appears as a poet and the player of a stringed instrument, and at the end of the narrative is given the epithet 'the sweet singer of Israel.' But the editors themselves ascribed psalms to different poets.... One cannot categorically exclude the possibility that a couple of these psalms were actually written by David, though it is difficult to gauge the likelihood." See Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), page xv.

39. Isaiah 11:1. Indeed, even the prohibition against David's building the Temple, because he had been a man of war, ends with an assurance that David's son will be the one to erect the Temple, and that God "will establish his throne of kingship over Israel forever" (I Chronicles 22:10), further confirming the messianic prediction of Isaiah 11. Another guarantee of the messianic destiny of David's lineage is in God's promise to Solomon, "I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever, in accordance with the covenant I made with your father, David, saying, 'You shall never lack a descendant ruling over Israel'" (1 Kings 9:5).

40. II Samuel 11-12. The sages do try to mitigate the gravity of David's sin with their famous saying, "Whoever says that David sinned is merely erring, for it is said, 'And David behaved himself wisely in all his way, and the Lord was with him' (I Samuel 18:14)" (Shabbat 56a). The ensuing discussion explains that it was customary for men at the time to issue writs of divorce before heading into battle; thus, Bathsheba would not have been—in the strict halachic sense—married. At the same time, however, there are several talmudic sources that clearly acknowledge the fact of David's sin, such as "Do not [frequent places] where immodesty is common on account of the incident which occurred [with David and Bathsheba]," (Pesahim 113a; see also Moed Kattan 9a, Sanhedrin 107a, and Bava Metzia 59a). Modern scholars, too, do not shy away from harsh criticism of David's character; see, for example, Halpern, *David's Secret Demons*, and Finkelstein and Silberman, *David and Solomon*.

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41. References to land appear some 1300 times in the Hebrew Bible, with only a few dozen such references appearing in the New Testament (fifty two, to be exact).

42. Matthew 22:21.

43. Indeed, the phrase “Kingdom of God” never appears in the Hebrew Bible, but is mentioned over sixty times in the New Testament, primarily in the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke).

44. Luke 24:44.

45. “Biblical Literature/Hebrew Scriptures,” in Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 2 (New York: Simon & Schuster MacMillan, 1995), p. 156.

46. See, for example, Barbara Tuchman, *Practicing History* (New York: Ballantine, 1981), p. 134.